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Statewide Tourism Awards Presented at Governor's Conference

(HELENA) – Five statewide tourism award winners were honored for their achievements by the Montana Tourism and Recreation Industry at the 2009 Montana Governor's Conference on Tourism and Recreation held in Helena, March 30-31. Tourism award winners are selected for their outstanding contributions to Montana's tourism industry. Lieutenant Governor John Bohlinger presented the awards at the annual Montana Tourism Awards Banquet, Monday March 30.

"The people, partnerships and events being honored highlight the passion and dedication found throughout our tourism industry," said Governor Brian Schweitzer. "Our state is fortunate to have such a committed core of individuals working on behalf of a better Montana."

"Montana's tourism industry plays a crucial role in Montana's economy," said Commerce Director Anthony Preite. "Ten million people visited Montana last year, and they spent \$3 billion dollars during their stay. The people that comprise our tourism industry are at the root of this success."

2009 Tourism Award Winners

Bill and Ramona Holt—Lifetime Achievement Award

Rhonda Fitzgerald—Tourism Person of the Year

Missoula's River City Roots Festival—Tourism Event of the Year

Crown of the Continent Geotourism Council—Tourism Partnership of the Year

Bill and Ramona Holt, from Lolo, Montana, received the industry's first-ever **Lifetime Achievement Award**. For their entire professional lives, Bill and Ramona Holt have been dedicated to sharing their love of the west, Montana and the rich heritage of their home with visitors from around the globe.

Over the past thirty years, the Holt's have served on over a dozen regional and statewide societies, foundations, councils and boards. Bill Holt had a long tenure on the Board of Trustees for the Montana Historical Society and Ramona Holt has served ten years on the Governor-appointed Tourism Advisory Council and been a valued member of the Glacier Country Tourism Commission for close to twenty years.

The Holt's greatest legacy is their passion and generosity in preserving Montana's history. Playing a paramount role in preserving and enhancing Traveler's Rest National Historic Landmark and State Park, the Holt's will be donating a museum complete with various collections of valuable art and artifacts, a visitor center and additional lands to Traveler's Rest so that it will remain in perpetuity a true destination for lovers of history from around the world.

In announcing the Holt's award, Governor's Tourism Advisory Council Chair, Stan Ozark noted "Few people have contributed so much to the tourism industry of Montana throughout their lives. Ramona and Bill have guided countless others to appreciate our industry and are keenly aware of its economic impact. Few individual's love of the Montana way of life and desire to preserve its heritage manifested to the degree of dedication exhibited by Bill and Ramona. All of Montana owes them a debt of gratitude."

Rhonda Fitzgerald, owner of the Garden Wall Bed and Breakfast in Whitefish and member of the Governor's Tourism Advisory Council, received the **Tourism Person of the Year Award**. For several decades, Fitzgerald has been a steadfast advocate for tourism and fervently involved in enriching her community of Whitefish. She has been very instrumental in both developing and promoting the Tourism Advisory Council's Tourism Charter as well as the statewide Branding Initiative.

Fitzgerald also helped establish the Glacier Nordic Center, the very successful Whitefish Downtown Farmer's Market, was a founding member of the Whitefish CVB, has been invaluable in connecting people and business to the local growers through the local Farm Hands Co-op in Whitefish is an active member of the National Geographic Geotourism Council as well as the Heart of Whitefish Committee and has tirelessly researched and lobbied the legislature for numerous bills which either directly or indirectly involve the tourism industry.

In presenting this award, it was noted that, "Rhonda has a tireless dedication to nurturing tourism in Montana, a tenacious philosophy of preserving sense of place and a fierce commitment to keeping Montana unique."

In recognition of an event that supports our vital downtowns and main streets, the **Tourism Event of the Year** honored **Missoula's River City Roots Festival**.

Entering into its 4th year this summer, this event hopes to double its inaugural year attendance and bring upwards of 10,000 people to the streets of Missoula's vibrant and culturally diverse downtown. It is a signature event which is a celebration of their community and an excellent opportunity to showcase Missoula's thriving town, their friendly people and the diverse opportunities available to their visitors.

The fact that this two-day festival filled with quality entertainment for all ages is free to attendees in a time where the state of the economy leads every headline was a central component to their being chosen for this award. By providing free entrance to the festival, it allows

attendees to spend their discretionary dollars supporting participants in the event such as food vendors, craftspeople and downtown businesses.

The **Tourism Partnership of the Year** award was presented to the **Crown of the Continent Geotourism Council**. This is a partnership that has reached beyond Montana's borders, building an international community celebrating the special qualities of the region and inviting all to share in the task of keeping this place special. The Crown of the Continent region surrounds Glacier and Waterton National Parks – an area covering northwest Montana, southwest Alberta and southeast British Columbia.

The Crown of the Continent Geotourism Council joined National Geographic in putting the concepts of geotourism to work in this unique area of the world. Geotourism looks at tourism as a tool for sustaining and enhancing the character of a place.

Twenty-two U.S. and Canadian organizations helped with the outreach and product funding. Begun in early 2007, this group helped National Geographic build a beautiful, engaging MapGuide by inviting residents of the region to share what they felt was special and unique about their area and what they were doing to keep it that way. 640 nominations were received, 130 are highlighted on the mapguide and hundreds more are part of the companion website that the Council had created.

Steve Thompson with the National Parks Conservation Association was the Project Coordinator for the Geotourism Council. His inclusive leadership style provided a solid foundation for keeping the project and council moving forward. He accepted the award on behalf the Crown Council members.

These awards are presented annually to individuals, events, partnerships and communities whose efforts to promote or develop Montana's tourism opportunities have preserved or enhanced tourism's role in Montana's economy. A list of previous award winners can be found at: <http://travelmontana.state.mt.us/conference/awards.asp>.

Tourism and recreation is one of Montana's leading industries. In 2008, 10 million people visited Montana spending \$3 billion during their stay. Nearly 45,000 jobs are directly and indirectly supported by nonresident travel, resulting in over \$1 billion in total personal and proprietors' income for Montana residents.*

*preliminary 2008 figures

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